

Critique

Deepening Discipleship  Developing Discernment

Christian Discernment 201 Reading Fiction Christianly

MAKING DISCERNMENT AN INTEGRAL PART OF READING FICTION.

by Denis Haack

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Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

www.RansomFellowship.org

Resources
for Equipping
Wise Christians

If you're already familiar with Ransom Fellowship, you probably know that we love to encourage discussion and thoughtful responses to art. This certainly includes fiction, whether written by a Christian or not. Novels and short stories provide opportunities for learning about ourselves and our neighbors as well as for pondering some of the Big Questions in life. But for a lot of us, thinking Christianly about the novels we're reading doesn't come naturally. Here are some questions to help you get started. Going through these questions will not only increase your appreciation for well-written books but will help you grow in discernment.

OVERVIEW

1. What was your initial reaction or first impression of the fiction you read? Why do you think you responded the way you did?
2. What is (are) the major theme(s)?
3. Have you read other works of fiction with which this work can be compared or contrasted?
4. What do you know about the author?
5. What is the significance of the title?
6. Read aloud any phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that particularly impressed you when you first read the work.?

THE STORY:

WHO HAS... WHAT AT STAKE... IN WHAT KIND OF WORLD?

1. Who is telling the story? Whose voice do you hear? (Is it the person who is going through the experience, or someone else telling you about that person?) How does the relationship between the narrator and the implied listener help the reader focus on what's important about the character(s)?

If the narrator's voice is in the first person, is it the main character speaking? If so, what does he/she reveal, directly or indirectly, about him/herself? Or is it some other character speaking? If so, what kind of perspective does this character bring to bear on the main character(s)?

If the narrator's voice is in the third person, is the perspective limited to the perspective of one character? Or is it omniscient within the world of the story?

2. Who is the narrator's implied audience or listener?
3. What do you-the actual listener-think you know about the main character(s)? What is the source of your knowledge? What do you know about the other characters that appear? Who do you identify with? Why? What emotions did you experience as the story unfolded? To what extent did you "enter into" the world of the story?
4. What do the characters stand to lose and/or gain within the story? What are they trying to seek or avoid? What is most important to them? What are the consequences of their choice(s)?
5. What is the span of experience covered by (or contained in) the story? How does the span help the reader understand what is at stake for the character(s)? Are there stages or periods in this span of time? If yes, what are they? Why does the author arrange them in the order that appears in the work?
6. What do you know about the world of the story-where does it take place? What is important in terms of place, climate, scenery, color, etc.? What is the source of your knowledge? What is assumed rather than stated? What key image(s) or motif(s) helps to define this world? What is this motif's relationship to the character(s)?

7. What is the relationship between this story-world and reality? Is the story understandable in terms of your personal experience? Is it understandable only by making certain adjustments or accepting new rules of plausibility, relevance, etc.?
8. Does this story function as...
 - ...a slice of reality?
 - ...a microcosm of reality?
 - ...a metaphor for reality?

WORLD AND LIFE VIEW

1. Within the world of the story, what assumptions or statements are made about reality, morals, and the meaning of life?
2. What is really real? Is there a God? If so, how is he/she/it portrayed? Do characters exhibit a sense of transcendence? How are human beings portrayed, and what is their significance? How are nonhuman creatures portrayed?
3. What is the basis for truth and morality? Is there anything that's truly true? What makes it so? Is there right and wrong? What makes it so? What really matters?
4. What is the meaning of life and reality? What makes it so? Is history, in the time span of the story, cyclical or linear? What happens at death?
5. What is the basic identity of the character(s)? What motivates the character(s)? What do they value most and work hardest to obtain? What kind of action do the characters, particularly the main character, undertake? What tests them in this undertaking? What results from their choices? Do the main characters succeed or fail in their quest? How do you know?

A DISCERNING RESPONSE

1. Does the world and life view in the fictional universe of the story resonate with or fail to resonate with the biblical world and life view of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation? Where is there agreement? Where is there disagreement? How extensive and significant is the disagreement/agreement? To the extent the work contains ideas and values which are Christian, are they inclusively or exclusively Christian? Do they give a relatively complete, or relatively superficial and incomplete version of the Christian view?
2. How has this work of fiction affected you? Does the overall cultural or intellectual significance of this work supercede any offensiveness that might occur from some aspect(s) of it? Can you minimize the impact of these negative aspects in order to appropriate the more important benefits of the work?
3. If you did not enjoy this work, is there a reason why you should encounter it anyway? Would you recommend this work of fiction to others? Why or why not? How would you describe the work-and your reaction to it-in a way that would make sense to a Christian friend? To a nonchristian friend? Do the two descriptions differ? Why? Should they?
4. To what extent does this work act as a window of insight into some aspect of life, culture, and reality? To what extent can it be a point of contact with those who may not share your deepest conviction?

These questions originally appeared in an issue of *Critique* #1 - 1998.

Sources:

A few of the questions—especially #4 under “World and life view” and #1-2 under “A discerning response”—are adapted from Leland Ryken’s superb books, *Windows to the World: Literature in Christian Perspective* (Dallas, TX: Probe Books; 1985, 1990) and *Culture in Christian Perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press; 1986).]

Ransom Fellowship is a writing and speaking ministry designed to help Christians develop skill in discernment—by which we mean skill in studying the Scriptures and applying the truth of God’s Word to all of life and culture.

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Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

Fax: 507.280.9535
Email: info@ransomfellowship.org